

## **Report to Pennsylvania Southeast Conference Annual Meeting Spring 2024**

**Rev. Kevin J. McLemore, *Associate Conference Minister for Search & Call***

### **Overview**

As I find myself in my third year of service to the Conference, I remain thankful for this opportunity to serve our churches and clergy with Search and Call, and as a support person to our Committees on Ministry. In addition, I've been blessed to provide support in various other ways, including through Boundary and Diversity Training, Lay Leadership training, and with many conversations with ministers and congregations who were seeking some guidance, some not always related to search and call matters. Additionally, I've preached at many of our churches since last Spring, and I've appreciated every chance to meet the people of the church in their local settings. As I often say, the best part of Conference work for me is working with and beside church members doing work in Pastoral searches and on Committees on Ministry.

When I began my work beside you in February 2022, we had 17 churches looking for pastors, whether they be settled, interim, supply, or designated. In January 2024 we reached the lowest number of churches who were in active search for pastoral leadership – 3 – but that quickly changed as some churches completed the process of submitting their long profiles used for seeking settled ministers. We are likely to see more churches complete their long profiles in the coming months. The truth is that the ideal for search and call is a balanced number of available full-time positions and available clergy, though both are in decline. In February 2022 we had too many churches looking for pastors and not enough clergy to fill those positions, especially interim positions. This past January we had too few available churches for those clergy feeling called to a new ministry setting, but who wished to stay in our region. I don't have a particular number where that equilibrium happens in our conference – just a sense that too much and too little in one direction is not ideal.

Certainly, if you had conversation with me over the last few years, you've my heard constant drumbeat of "the future is shared." In fact, you may have grown weary of it by this point. But some truths need to be repeated, and with 60% of our PSEC churches now only able to offer funding for part-time clergy, mostly at half-time or less, this mantra about sharing remains truer than ever. Simply put, it is much easier to find a full-time clergyperson than it is to find someone able or willing to serve only in one part-time position. Recently, two of our churches were offering half-time positions, but they partnered together to offer a solid compensation package between their two churches and received far more interest from candidates. That doesn't mean that God doesn't guide pastors to part-time settings – indeed, thank God this happens – but most pastors under 65 need full-time employment. We may be entering an era of increasing bi-vocational clergy ("tent-maker," which is what Paul did to make ends meet) as churches numerically and fiscally decline, but the reality is that we still need clergy to serve in our settings – and now in multiple settings. This is not a new model for the American church, since our churches in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries were mainly served by pastors who shepherded two or more congregations.

I hope that as we find ourselves with less resources for employing ministers, we will find new ways of embracing our shared and collective futures as congregations. And I would encourage congregations and pastors to begin making connections and anticipating how to be the church in service to Christ in different ways NOW rather than in the future. When I one day go back to the parish, I know that I will be asking the following question: do we need to – or should we – be doing this ministry by ourselves?

### **The Frequent Use of Designated-Term Pastors**

As you looked over Brea Rarick's Ministry Report, you may have noticed a surprisingly small number of installations of newly settled pastors over the last 12 months. Some of that is due to the difficulty of finding candidates, but in our Conference, it is likely owing to the fact that many of our churches are being served by designated-term pastors. Pastors in this category have been chosen by the congregation to serve for a particular time (usually 18-24 months) and to complete certain designated tasks, such as completing the Long Church Profile. At the end of this term, both the pastor and the congregation will decide, with the guidance of the Spirit, whether the pastor will move into a settled position. When I arrived in early 2022, we had many churches looking for interim ministers during a time when there were few to be found. Given the option, many changed their church profiles and sought designated-term pastors, especially those who were not coming out of deep conflict, a long-term pastorate, or a crisis within the church that might need the specialized training of an interim minister. Many of these designated-term pastors are still in place, though some are nearing the end of their designated-term call agreements and decisions are being made by both the churches and the pastors. Because there are more interims currently available, we are using designated-term pastors less often, but it remains an option for some churches. Most churches and pastors seem to be happy with their current situation, while some are not sure it is a long-term match. In my next Spring report, we will have more data on how this frequent use of the designated-term role worked out.

### **Committees on Ministry**

I continue to be the PSEC Conference representative to our 5 Committees on Ministry (6 separate meetings, because Covenant divides their COM). This has been a challenging year for some of our COM's, as they dealt with difficult issues. I cannot express my appreciation for these volunteers who serve their Associations. Thank you.

### **Final Note**

I remain grateful to God and to the Conference for calling me into this role. I am also grateful for my colleagues in the Conference, but especially for Brea Rarick, my Assistant, who is a gift to you and to the Conference.

Peace,

The Rev. Kevin J. McLemore

Associate Conference Minister for Search and Call